

WEBER STATE UNIVERSITY ACCREDITATION UPDATES

June 2008 Newsletter

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Deconstructing the “Black Box” of Accreditation

Preparation for periodic visits by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, the regional accreditation agency that accredits Weber State University, may be the most comprehensive accreditation activity we experience on our campus. However, at any given time there may be self-studies and visits occurring on campus for several of the specialized accreditations that Weber has received.



This ongoing accreditation activity may occasionally seem like a recurring bad dream. First we aggregate scores of pages of facts and analysis into a self-study that, we hope, reflects accurately our educational activities. Then we wait and worry for the site visit. That visit tends to feel a great deal like an appraiser setting a value on our home. Just like the appraiser, whose process of securing comparables and determining differing conditions we understand, we recognize the standards against which the accreditation reviewer is to measure us. However, just as with the appraiser, we sense that there is a “black box” process the takes our data and the comparisons and derives an answer that doesn’t appear to have a linear relationship with the input.

Having been a reviewer, Northwest Commissioner and, more importantly, a participant in the process at institutions that were being reviewed, I have a few observations that may help deconstruct the accreditor’s “black box.”

1. Traditionally, accreditation focused on reputational issues, such as faculty training, number of volumes in the library, student/faculty ratios, average instructional hours of faculty, preparation of students or research production. While some of these issues may continue to figure in accreditation, most of the emphasis has shifted to evidence that there is some “value added” in the educational process. Most accreditation agencies are not looking for how good you are, but for how much and how well your students learn.

2. Regional accreditation, which makes an accredited institution’s students eligible for federal financial aid, has to satisfy the U.S. Department of Education that 1) the institutions that it accredits offer some value in exchange for the tuition they receive 2) the institutions that it accredits are not likely to experience a financial downturn that will strand students mid-degree, and that 3) the institutions that it accredits are honest with students. Further, such accreditation seeks to assure students, employers and other accredited institutions that there is a reasonable

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Please call or email

Ryan Thomas

at

801-626-6006

or

ryanthomas2@weber.edu

edu

level of quality in the instructional programs of the institutions that it accredits. This quality implies that credits are relatively “fungible” between accredited institutions.

3. Specialized accreditation does not have a direct relationship to students’ eligibility for federal aid, so its focus is on preparation for the profession. Often the requirements for such accreditation correlate with state laws with respect to licensure such as nursing, engineering, law and accounting. In such instances success in preparing students for licensure as evidenced by pass rates on the respective exam, becomes an important consideration. Where there is no licensure requirement for a profession, such accreditation considers best practices, often established by elite institutions, and applies those as the expected standards. In the case of this latter group, traditional reputational issues may figure more prominently than with other accreditation, because there are no standardized outcomes to form a basic measure.

These observations lead to the following suggestions:

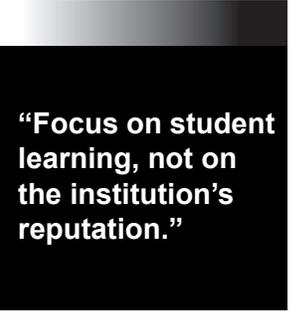
1. Don’t be afraid to tell your best story. Sometimes the requirement for analysis leads an institution to write a relatively unflattering view of its programs and assets. While you are not writing ad copy, you are trying to tell your story to individuals who are not going to be familiar with the institutional strengths that you may take for granted. Explain your strengths.

2. Description is not analysis. While most of us try to help our students reflect this distinction in their writing, often self-studies are long on description and short on analysis. Explain what the facts mean and what the implications of those facts are on the academic programs of the institution.

3. Focus on student learning, not on the institution’s reputation. Evidence of student learning will trump any other card in the deck in the game of accreditation.

4. Ensure that the evidence of student learning, or failing to learn, has an impact on institutional decisions. For example, evidence of a high failure class begs a response. The problem may be student preparation, so some form of remediation, tutoring or supplemental instruction may be warranted. In some instances, a change in the way a class is offered may be the answer. If 50% of the students in sections of 200+ students fail Introductory Economics, versus 20% in sections of 20 or fewer students, some change in scheduling may be a part of the answer. Document how your program has changed based upon the data derived from student learning outcomes.

5. Answer the question that is asked. Long complicated answers tend to confuse rather than to clarify. Focus on the specific standard you are trying to address and answer only the questions that you are asked to address.



“Focus on student learning, not on the institution’s reputation.”